

**16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 17 If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. 18 But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”**

Lord, Grant us the Courage to Stand by Our Conviction in Christ

This is Reformation Sunday. It is often said that the Catholic Church was very intolerant throughout the ages because of the Inquisition and what not. But when you actually study church history it seems to me that the Catholic Church was tolerating all kinds of stuff. They still do. Some venerate Mary and put her on the same level of God. Priests were allowed to have sexual relations behind the scenes. People could bribe their way through all kinds of sins through the purchases of indulgences, and nobody said too much about it. It wasn't until Luther's 95 Theses attacked the system of indulgences and the power of the Pope that the Church decided, "We won't tolerate that!" So they wanted to arrest him and put him on trial and put him to death as a heretic, just like they did to John Hus. Luther would have to either stand his ground and risk death or recant.

Let's look at today's text. The Babylonians allowed the Jews to get settled in Babylon and even hold powerful offices in Babylon. They were seemingly very tolerant of the Jews. Yet in today's text the King decided to be very intolerant when it came to the statue that he had built. He built a 90 foot statue and commanded the people to bow down to it whenever they heard the sound of music. Anyone who didn't? Well, they would be thrown in the fiery furnace and burned to death.

The three wise men had been deported from Israel. They believed in Yahweh, the LORD, as the one true God. They had seen God deliver them from death when Daniel was given the interpretation of a dream Nebuchadnezzar had. They knew how powerful their God was. They had heard stories of the Exodus. They also knew the 1st Commandment - **You shall have no other gods. You shall not make an image in the form of anything.** It was much easier when they were living in Israel, but now that they were in Babylon, their faith became much more dangerous. Nebuchadnezzar wanted to flex his muscle. Do this or else. I wonder if such ultimatums will be coming our way too, probably sooner than later?

If the music was played at a certain time each day, the wise men could have perhaps made sure to be out of sight. Or they might have pretended to kneel while saying to themselves, "I am just fixing my sandal." Or maybe they would say, "How can I tell these people about the true God when I'm dead? Besides, God knows who I am, and I don't need to prove myself to Him for Him to know that." You can reason yourself into doing all sorts of things and justify your action or inaction with a thousand excuses.

But God's Law was specific. Exodus 20 goes on,

**You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.**

Right is right and wrong is wrong. God didn't say it was ok to worship them if my life was at stake. He also said He is a JEALOUS God, who punishes those who transgress His commandments. So the wise men had a choice. Should they fear a man who could burn them to death, or should they fear the God who could burn them eternally in death? If you're going to live your life in fear, who are you going to be more afraid of? Who should you be more afraid of?

The wise men publicly refused to bow down, and there were other politicians who wanted them dead. So they were brought in before the King. Nebuchadnezzar liked them. He didn't want them to die. So he let them have one more opportunity to bow down. Now they were right in front of the fire and the king. It's one thing to not do it in public, but it's another thing to stand up against the King and in front of the fire. And isn't that true in life? It's easier to pray in church than when you are in a public restaurant. It's easier to profess your faith here than it is at school.

Nebuchadnezzar had what he considered a foolproof way of making them bow down. It was nothing a good hot fire couldn't fix. What god would actually save them from burning to death? It's a false dichotomy. If your God is real, He'll save you. If He's not, He won't. Sometimes we fall for it too, because God promises in Isaiah, **“When you walk through the fire, you won't be burned.”** Does this mean that we could never be burned? When God promises to send His angels does it mean we can never be harmed? No, not in a sinful and fallen world that is still under the curse of death. That's not how God works. His reality and existence is not dependent on whether I break my arm or not. His love isn't dependent on whether I get cancer or not. The promises of God do not force Him to keep me from getting hurt in this world. We just don't know what is always best for us.

What a wonderful confession of faith the wise men gave, reflecting a heavenly wisdom. **“O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”** They didn't want the King to think that he had more power than their King. They seemed to show no fear of him at all. Note also that they didn't base their faith on whether or not God would save them from being burned alive. They knew God had the power to do so. They just had no specific promise from God that He would. Either way, they weren't going to bow down to the false idol. It was wrong. Their allegiance was to the LORD and no other. There was no two ways about it.

So the wise men knew what to do. Do they stand up for their faith in the one true God and get burned to death? Or do they bow the knee and live? It was truly a life and death situation. It was as black and white as you could get. They stood up! They didn't bow down.

When Luther read the Bible he realized that praying to the saints was idolatry. He saw that all of his works wouldn't save him, it was Jesus' death and resurrection that saved him, through faith. So would he recant or bow the knee to Rome? He too could have burned at the stake just as John Hus was. “Here I stand!” he said.

It makes me think of Jesus before the High Priest. He knew exactly what would happen if He confessed who He was. He was facing more than a fiery furnace. He was facing God's wrath and abandonment on the cross.

He made the great confession. Are you the Christ? "I am." With that confession the high priest tore his robes, and everything was set in motion. Jesus identified Himself as the Messiah, and God identified Him as the Scapegoat who would die for the sins of the world. He didn't back down even though He knew the consequences would be much worse than a death by fire. God accepted His sacrifice. He rose from the dead.

The devil isn't always so bold and in your face in his temptations. If he came right up to you and told you to bow down to an image of a Lion or a Tiger and worship it or be burned in a fire, you would perhaps gather the courage to say "no." But if he puts the Lion or the Tiger in a nice outfit and promises you joy and pleasure and success and friendship by watching the idol throw a ball and win a game, then you may bow the knee much more easily. Your offerings to your gods come in the form of tickets and paraphernalia. Your attention and your time and your mood revolves around the Tiger and the Lion, the Wolverine and the Spartan. You bow the knee without ever bending it. The fire may not be a blazing furnace threatening you to be burned to death. It may instead be the warmth of an electric blanket on a cold Sunday morning. The devil gets us to bow to the idol without even realizing it is an idol or even knowing that we are bowing. That's even sadder yet. The wise men refused to bow and were thrown into a fiery furnace, and we're not even willing to make much smaller sacrifices for Christ.

What is worse? We take these sins lightly. We make light of hell and mock the fire. We say to ourselves, "It's not as if God will send me to hell for sleeping in on a Sunday morning." That is one of the main retorts to sin. "So you say I'm going to hell for not giving my first fruits? For not going to church?" Everything comes down to whether God will send me to hell for such a minor thing. So we respond, "no, no, I'm not saying that." But what are we also then saying? Some sins are smaller than others? Some sins don't matter to God that much. Little sins don't send to hell? So it's ok to do those ones? But that's not what the Word says. All sin deserves God's wrath, even the seemingly small sins. Maybe the problem is that we don't see any fire of hell or God's wrath any more. We assume everyone goes to heaven and that nothing really angers God at all, because God loves everyone. But that's not the way it works.

If God didn't hate sin, then why did Ananias and Sapphira get put to death for lying about their offering? Why did Korah and his family get swallowed alive when they tried to rebel against Moses? Why did a man get stoned to death for merely gathering sticks on a Saturday? Why did the rich man end up in hell? Maybe he was a good guy? The Bible says, "**It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.**" So the remedy to sin is not to forget the fire of God's wrath or pretend it doesn't exist. It is to take it seriously and run to the cross for forgiveness. It is to throw yourself at the mercy of Christ and cling tenaciously to Him. "Come hell or high water, I'm clinging to Jesus. I don't want to anger my God, and I'll risk it all rather than do that."

We see that kind of commitment from the three wise men. That's what made them the most wise. That's what gave Luther courage. He took God seriously. He didn't laugh at his sins. He didn't try an easy way out through the purchase of an indulgence. He knew he needed more than a piece of paper. When he found out through the Scriptures that the only way to be saved from God's wrath was through faith in Jesus death for the sins of the world, it gave him courage to stand up against the threats of death and excommunication from the only church he had grown up in. He realized he was saved and forgiven through faith alone. It wasn't about how badly he beat himself, for Christ was beaten for him. It wasn't the Catholic Church that would save him.

It was Jesus who would save him. It was the conviction of the law and the comfort of the gospel that gave him hope and conviction and willingness to face death.

God came to the rescue. How so? The King said, **“Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.”** Who was that fourth person walking around in the fire with the men? Could it not have been Jesus Christ prior to taking on the flesh? When they came out of the fire Daniel writes, **“They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.”** God chose to save them from the fire by getting in the fire with them. They came out completely unharmed. Then the King knew that the God of the Jews was more powerful than he had ever imagined. He issued a decree that nobody should speak ill of their God. What a testimony to the power of the true God!

It is this God who came to save us through Jesus Christ. Through faith in Christ, we are resurrected to eternal life. This is why we are baptized, so that we can be bathed in His blood and adopted into His family and given faith. This is why we receive the Lord’s Supper, so that Jesus can come to us and give us Himself for our salvation. God still comes to us. He still keeps us from the fires of hell by walking among us and saving us from His wrath. In Jesus God promises us that even though death will harm us, we will come forth from the grave to live. Even though we die, we live. And why is that? We too have the same God, who went through death for us. We see the power of this God, who rescues from floods and fires: brings back from the dead.

The three men in the fiery furnace, it’s more than a nice Sunday School story. It’s not just for us to say, “That’s nice.” It’s so that we too realize that this God is for us too. It’s so that we don’t back down in fear when we are threatened and commanded to bow the knee to today’s gods of tolerance and greed and selfishness. It seems so dramatic and courageous. Luther nailing the 95 Theses to the Castle Door church. Him standing before the Emperor and saying, “Here I stand! I can do no other! God help me! Amen.” Every generation is faced with it’s own tests. Some are more bold and in your face than others. We are always in need of Reformation, where we see our sin and recognize how holy our God is, but also see how gracious and forgiving He is in Christ. We too need to ask ourselves, “Is this worth living for? Is this worth dying for?” Yes it is.

“Lord, give us a strong conviction of faith in Christ crucified for us. Then grant us the courage that comes with this conviction, no matter what kind of fire it brings.” Amen.